

INTERVIEW

Meet Claudette Johnson, our critic's tip to win the 2024 Turner prize

The British painter grew up thinking the art world's biggest prize was for other people. Now she's our critic's tip to win



"I never thought the Turner prize was for me," says Claudette Johnson, whose recent exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery led to a nomination
JACK LAWSON FOR THE TIMES

[Laura Freeman](#) | Thursday June 20 2024, 12.00am BST, The Times

All along the railway lines in the east London Docklands where Claudette Johnson has her studio, the buddleia is in bloom. After an everlastingly long, wet winter and spring, the sight and scent on a warm June day are glorious. It feels like a fitting metaphor for Johnson's career. At 64, she is the hot new thing in British art, the undiscovered talent, the name on every gallerist's lips.

Her recent exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery in London led to her being nominated for this year's Turner prize alongside striplings Delaine Le Bas, 58, Pio Abad, 41, and Jasleen Kaur, 38. This week her show *Darker than Blue* opens at the Barber Institute in Birmingham.

If I had said to Johnson 20 years ago that she would one day be shortlisted for the Turner prize, her works would hang on the walls of the National Portrait Gallery and visitors would walk past paintings by Gauguin, Cézanne and Degas to get to her show at the Courtauld, would she have said, “Get out”?

“Absolutely,” she says. “It was never for me. I remember when the Turner prize began thinking, that’s a nice prize for other artists. It’s unimaginable.”

Johnson is softly spoken – workmen are drilling outside her studio window and I nudge the recorder closer, worried I will lose her whisper – and modest to a fault. While some artists see admiration as their due and are prickly when insufficiently flattered, Johnson seems positively embarrassed by praise.

Now that I am home and may spare her blushes, I will say this: Johnson to win the Turner. I went to the Courtauld on a glum day in January and left fired with enthusiasm for the future of figurative art. Her subjects are black women and men, larger than lifesize and so close to the picture plane that the frame can hardly contain them. Johnson works in gouache (opaque watercolour) and pastel on paper, sometimes applying the colour so densely – on a tracksuit, for example – that it has the nap of velvet, at other times reducing an arm to transparent nerves-and-tendon sketchiness. If she wins, it will be both a personal triumph and a shot in the arm for the art and craft of picture-making. (The most headline-grabbing Turner entry is Kaur’s Ford Escort car with a giant doily on its roof.)



The figure of a woman swaying to a beat within Johnson's Blues Dance (2023) is inspired by a photograph

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Johnson was born in Manchester in 1959 to Windrush generation parents. Her mother worked in a clothes factory, her father in the haulage industry. He had a knack for drawing horses from memory, which delighted the young Claudette. As a boy in Jamaica, he had had a serious accident when he was thrown from a horse and Johnson's grandfather ("not an easy man") insisted on taking his son early every morning and holding him under a freezing waterfall. It was a rough treatment, but this improvised hydrotherapy got Johnson's father back on his feet.

Johnson showed an early talent for drawing. She remembers, aged seven or so, drawing a Spanish dancer and labouring over the flounces and layers of the dress and feeling “a sense of pride in achieving something”. Her parents were never “overly effusive”, but they still had her teenage drawings up in the house for decades after she had left home. At school, she used to copy photographs in magazines, drawing pop stars — Marc Bolan, Michael Jackson — and giving or selling them to girls at school. But she had never drawn from a real person until a watchful art teacher, noticing Johnson’s affinity for the figure, borrowed a girl from the year below to sit for her.

“It was a transformative movement. Everything went quiet.” Johnson remembers the tennis player Roger Federer saying that when he was on form it was as if he’d “entered a golden space”. During that art class, “It felt almost as if it wasn’t quite me, but something else working through me. I know that sounds very mystical.”

She went to Wolverhampton School of Art in the 1980s, where she was something of an outsider. The emphasis was on vast abstract canvases with layers of expressive impasto. One of her tutors had been taught by Kandinsky. Johnson was determinedly working from life, in pastels and on paper. “I think they thought I wasn’t quite serious enough.”

It was an exciting time to be young, black and British. We hear no end about the YBAs — the Young British Artists Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin, Michael Landy and Gary Hume — but Johnson points out that the WYBAs — the Wolverhampton Young Black Artists, including Keith Piper, Marlene Smith and Eddie Chambers — got there first. Before Johnson had even graduated, she was being included in shows in London, exhibiting at the Africa Centre and the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Fellow students would say, not a little enviously, “Oh, well, it’s all right for you.”



Johnson's Protection is crafted with oils, oil pastels and soft pastels and printed on gesso-primed watercolour paper

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Johnson's rise was not inexorable. A couple of years after graduating she applied for an Arts Council grant. "It was probably £100 but that was quite a lot of money back in 1985." She didn't get it. "I was told later by someone who was on the panel that when they looked at my work, they thought it didn't speak to a wide enough community – that it was too focused on the black audience. In their view, it didn't have any universal appeal." It says something about her resilience and lack of rancour that she continues, "In a way it's good to realise how much things have moved on. It would be impossible to make that argument now."

In any case, in 1985 she also became pregnant with her first child. She remembers Chambers inviting her to submit works to shows he was organising and all she could think was that her baby was six months old.

“When I think about that now,” she says, “I realise how hard I was fighting in my own mind not to believe that I didn’t have the same energy for work.” She had always rebelled against the idea that women artists who become mothers are “somehow sacrificing their work or their career. And although I don’t think it’s quite as extreme a sacrifice, there are losses, of course there are. Because there’s only so much energy in a day.” She felt herself slipping into the background. “Until, I thought, well, I was an artist once.”

Johnson’s two sons are now grown up. Her late, buddleia-like flowering should be a spur to any mother of small children despairing of books unwritten, concerts unplayed or paintings languishing on the easel.

In 2012 [Lubaina Himid](#), guardian angel of black British women artists, restaged *Thin Black Line(s)*, an exhibition originally shown at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1985, at Tate Britain. She got in touch with Johnson and encouraged her to find a studio again. “It felt like coming home.”

Her work has always focused on black women and more recently on black men — self-possessed, lost in thought or appraising, still or moving to music heard off stage. “I just felt that black women were virtually invisible,” she says. “Where was my experience being reflected in the art canon? And why is it not as important as anybody else’s?” If black women appeared at all in art, they were servants or exoticised or eroticised.

At times Johnson’s has been a “dangerous path to walk”. She was wary of the trap of trying to “counteract stereotypes with equally damaging stereotypes based on different parameters. I wasn’t and I’m still not interested in ‘ennobling’ black people in some way. I’m trying to do something that’s much more grounding. This is where we are. This is what we are all like. This is a universal experience. But we need to be looked at, we need to be seen. And we need to enjoy our presence.”



"I just felt that black women were virtually invisible," says Johnson

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Other artists tub-thump. Johnson sways and persuades. In one of her Barber pictures, a carving from a Benin artefact has made its way into the background. Your eye might first be drawn to the emerald creases of the jumper of the woman front and centre, but you find yourself asking what the Benin figure is doing there, so very far from home?

Where does Johnson stand on restitution? "My heart says yes, the works should be returned to where they were looted from. But on the other hand, of course, the fact that work is here and I was able to see it and then use it for that work has been helpful to me. So I see the value of museums having these objects but my sense of justice says yes to restitution."

On the wall behind us is a work in progress. It's a modern Pietà, the picture type of the Virgin Mary with the crucified Christ in her arms. In Johnson's Pietà, a black mother cradles her adult son. This is east London, where black boys die in the street. The texture of the skin and the intensity of expression make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Johnson is not sure about it. Narrative isn't usually her thing. "So it might disappear, but for the moment it's with us." Claudette Johnson might have managed a disappearing act once. We won't let it happen again.

***Claudette Johnson: Darker than Blue* is at the Barber Institute, Birmingham, June 22 to September 15, barber.org.uk**